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ABSTRACT

Teaching a unit on effective briefing techniques early in a basic speech class can develop in the student a sense of time consciousness, verbal conciseness, objectivity, appreciation for documentation, and logical organization. Briefing in this sense is a type of informative speech in which selected and compressed information is presented to one's superiors or other important listeners whose time is valuable and limited. An understanding of briefing is gained by considering a competitive intercollegiate debate. Although intercollegiate debate involves other facets such as debate strategy, some of the speech behaviors common to debate are useful in briefings. At the end of a unit on briefing, students will be able to (1) distinguish briefings from other forms of oral presentations, (2) describe two different types of briefings, and (3) prepare and present information and decision types of briefings. The content of the unit should include preparation for the briefing (analyzing the listeners and occasion, researching the subject, organizing the presentation, and rehearsing the presentation); types of briefings (information and decision); formats for briefing; and evaluation of briefings. (The paper includes a list of learning experiences for which briefing techniques are useful and important.) (HOD)

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SPEECH CLASS UNIT: EFFECTIVE BRIEFING SKILLS USED ON THE JOB

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SPEECH CLASS UNIT: EFFECTIVE BRIEFING SKILLS USED ON THE JOB*

Do you have students who are oblivious to speaking time limits? Are any wordy? Do some make unsupported statements or organize their speeches in a haphazard manner? Typically these problems arise in basic speech and business-professional speech courses. A unit on effective briefing techniques develops in the student time consciousness, verbal conciseness, objectivity, appreciation for documentation, and logical organization. In addition, it satisfies a career need of the student (required briefings on the job). Therefore, we recommend that teachers include early in their basic speech classes a unit on briefing.

The following unit's purpose is to develop in the student effective briefing skills. To this end, we will define briefing and relate it to careers, state student objectives, describe course content, recommend evaluation techniques, and suggest learning experiences for those teachers who would like to include a briefing unit in their basic speech classes.

Briefing Defined and Related to Careers.

A briefing is a type of informative speech in which selected and compressed information is presented to one's superiors, visitors, or other important listeners, whose time is valuable and limited.[1] Common in government, industry, and education, briefings include oral budget requests, status reports, hearings, and job descriptions. A briefing is difficult to prepare and present because the briefer is required to inform important people on a very broad subject in a controlled amount of time.

Included in a few basic speech and business-professional speech textbooks, briefings are treated either as an informative speech or as a highly specialized type of presentation reserved for the military. In the former, the guidelines fail to differentiate briefings from other types of informative speeches.[2] In

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the latter, the guidelines are difficult to generalize to a basic speech course because they adhere to the unique demands of the military.[3]

An understanding of briefing is gained by considering a competitive intercollegiate debate. The debaters seldom devote valuable time to frills; they attempt to use time efficiently. While speaking too fast is discouraged in a briefing, other characteristics of an effective debate such as conciseness, brievity, analysis, organization, reasoning, documentation, and objectivity are encouraged. Like briefings, debaters often address a single listener who is a very important person because he or she functions as the judge of the competition. Although intercollegiate debate involves other facets such as debate strategy, the debater's school, and debater's experience, some of the speech behaviors common to debate are useful in briefings.

Further insight into briefing is gained by considering the following example. One of us remembers a situation in which a university department head attempted to brief a new dean during his first visit to the department. Twice during the presentation the dean interrupted the head to demand that he "cut the bull! Just give me the facts." Exemplifying the time pressure that usually exists for a briefing (let's not waste the dean's valuable time), this example also illustrates how the listener exercises more influence over the conduct of the briefing than normally exists for other types of oral presentations. This is why the briefer looks mostly at the key person(s) being briefed.

Student Objectives

At the completion of this unit, you will be able to (1) distinguish briefings from other forms of oral presentations; (2) describe two different types of

briefings; (3) prepare and present information and decision types of briefings.

Unit Content

The content of this unit includes preparation for the briefing, types of briefings, formats for briefing, and the evaluation of briefings. Preparation consists of four skills.

First, you need to analyze the listeners and occasion. Who will attend? What do they already know? What are their Attitudes relevant to the subject of the briefing? What is your purpose? Are you going to inform or recommend? (See the difference between information and decision briefings below). What is your time limit?

Second, you need to research the subject. Narrow your subject so that it can be presented within the given time limit. Gather authoritative material to include as support for your ideas. Statistics, examples, and results of surveys or interviews are useful if brief and to the point. Keep in mind your analysis of the listeners and the occasion.

Third, you need to organize your presentation. Put the main ideas into a logical sequence (Don't appear haphazard). Prepare an outline in which you emphasize key points. Organize your outline and the briefing around three main parts: introduction, body, and conclusion (See formats for briefings below).

Finally, you need to rehearse your presentation. Practice until you feel that you can present the briefing smoothly. Request another person to hear you practice and critique your presentation. Time yourself; stay strictly within the time limits.

The time limits usually present a challenge to the briefer. Typically when you would like an hour to cover your subject, you get only ten minutes. The

department head cited above thought that he had more time in which to cover the subject, but found out differently during the briefing. Therefore, regardless of the type of briefing you need to establish priorities or criteria to help reduce the material to support or amplify your main ideas. Also, avoid "attention-getters", "motivational steps", and summaries.

Briefings are generally of two types, information and decision. If you intend to explain, interpret, amplify, expand on previous information, or chart progress, you need to present an information briefing in which you present in an objective manner only the essential facts, without drawing conclusions. In the above example of the department head, he needed to prepare and present an information briefing to acquaint the new dean with the operational activities of the department.

If you intend to propose a solution to a problem or otherwise attempt to obtain a decision, you need to present a decision briefing. You need to begin by stating clearly that you are seeking a decision, and at the conclusion of the briefing, ask for one. In the department head example, a decision briefing is required if the dean expected that the head would suggest reorganizing the department and ask for the dean's decision.

Although each has an introduction, body, and conclusion, the formats for the two briefings differ. The information briefing takes the following format. In the introduction, (1) recognize the superiors who are present, follow up with "gentlemen and ladies" if appropriate, and identify yourself; (2) explain the purpose, scope, and objective of the presentation; and (3) indicate whether any demonstrations, tours, or other procedures are included in the briefing.

In the body of the information briefing, you need to (1) organize your ideas in a logical sequence, often dictated by the content of the subject; (2) present your main ideas with clarity, conciseness, and completeness;

(3) use visual aids effectively (Aids should be necessary, appropriate, simple, and displayed only when needed); (4) include smooth, short transitions; (5) and answer questions at any time.

In the conclusion, (1) ask for questions; (2) make a brief final statement (such as "this concludes my presentation. Do you have any further questions?"; (3) and if appropriate, announce the next briefer. Conclude your briefing well within the time limits to allow for the questions. If there are none, you can elaborate on a main idea.

The decision briefing follows a different format. In the introduction, (1) recognize the person(s) being briefed and identify yourself; (2) state clearly that the purpose of the briefing is to obtain a decision and announce the problem area(s) requiring action; (3) explain any special procedures or introduce any additional briefer(s) included in your presentation; (4) and state what coordination with other departments, agencies, or individuals has already been accomplished.

In the body of the decision briefing, you need to include all five requirements of the information briefing body stated above. In addition, you need to (1) organize your ideas in such a way that you move from facts bearing on the problem(s) to a discussion of courses of action; (2) build your ideas on valid, relevant, and necessary assumptions, derived partly from your analysis of the listener(s) and the occasion; (3) and state the specific course of action that you recommend.

The conclusion of the decision briefing also requires that you ask for questions, but before you make a final statement and introduce the next briefer, if any, you need to request a decision or ask if your proposal is approved or disapproved. Although you state the proposed solution so that the listener(s) can render a "yes-no" decision, the listener(s) may delay making a decision until they have had more time to consider it.

Evaluation and feedback.

Because the briefing is a special type of informative speech, an appropriate rating form is needed for evaluating the briefer. The following critique forms are recommended:

INFORMATION BRIEFING CRITIQUE

1. Introduction to the presentation.
   a. Were the important people recognized and briefer identified?
   b. Did briefer explain the purpose of the briefing (information)?
2. Body
   a. Was the organization of ideas logical (spatial, temporal, etc.)?
   b. Was the presentation of ideas clear and concise?
   c. Were visual aids used effectively?
   d. Did briefer include smooth, short transitions?
3. Conclusion
   a. Did briefer ask for questions?
   b. Did briefer make a brief final statement and ask for further questions?
   c. Did briefer announce the next briefer, if appropriate?
   d. Did the briefer adhere to time limits?
   e. Was briefer prepared to answer questions at any time?
4. Delivery
   a. Was briefer unemotional, objective?
   b. Did briefer stand tall, appear formal?
   c. Did briefer look mostly at the important people?

DECISION BRIEFING CRITIQUE

1. Introduction to the presentation.
   a. Were the important people recognized and briefer identified?
   b. Did briefer explain the purpose of the briefing (to obtain a decision)?

2. Body

   a. Was the organization of ideas logical (problem-solution)?

   b. Was the presentation of ideas clear and concise?

   c. Did briefer include smooth, short transitions?

   d. Did briefer build ideas on valid, relevant, and necessary assumptions?

   e. Were visual aids used effectively?

   f. Was briefer prepared to answer questions at any time?

   g. Did briefer recommend specific courses of action?

3. Conclusion.

   a. Did briefer ask for questions?

   b. Did briefer request a decision or ask if the proposal is approved or disapproved?

   c. Did briefer make a brief final statement and announce the next briefer, if any?

   d. Did the briefer adhere to time limits?

4. Delivery.

   a. Was briefer unemotional, objective?

   b. Did briefer stand tall, appear formal?

   c. Did briefer look mostly at the important people?

One of us successfully taught briefing techniques in class. On occasion, the assignment was tailored to meet unusual circumstances. In one case, the President of the Student Government, who was a member of the class, agreed to be the important person for whom the rest of the class presented briefings on student affairs. Some students informed him about problems of which he had little information, while others researched topics he assigned them and made recommendations to him. This arrangement would work well when student officers, student

editors, and other student leaders can act as the important persons to be briefed. In another situation, a class of atheletic enthusiasts used the briefing assignment to inform the teacher about current athletic events on and off campus. Important national events including political campaigns may also serve as the main subject. In this way the teacher may organize the research talents of many students who in turn brief him or her on many aspects of one broad subject. At the end of the course, teacher evaluations indicated that the students felt that briefing techniques are useful and important.

Learning Experiences

A. In small groups, prepare a list of topics you would like to hear in information briefing and another list you would like to hear presented in decision briefings (such as drug and alcohol abuse programs, after-school activities, efficient study habits, etc.)

B. In small groups, prepare a list of general topics that an employer in business and industry would probably like to hear presented in information briefings and another list that he would probably like to hear in decision briefings (such as equal opportunity employment program, company's assets, company's employment benefits, status of union-management negotiations, etc.)

C. Prepare an information briefing on a topic of your choice and present it to the teacher.

D. Prepare a decision briefing on a student problem which you would like to present to the institutions board of trustees, control, or governors.

E. You are the leader of an industrial research team. Prepare a presentation to convince the board of directors to substantially increase your teams funding.

F. Interview a manager or administrator who prepares briefings in an organization. Find out how briefing techniques differ from those used for other types of oral presentations.

G. Observe an intercollegiate debate and identify those skills and techniques that are useful for effective briefings.

Footnotes

[1]Michigan Speech Association, Business Communication (Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook, 1979), p. 42.

[2]See for example Ray E. Nadeau and John M. Muchmore, Speech Communication: A Career-Education Approach, 2nd ed. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 238-250, and Harold P. Zelko and Frank E. X. Dance, "Chapter 5: Speeches and Briefings: Presentation," Business and Professional Speech Communication, 2nd ed., (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1978).

[3]For a military view of briefings, see Military Speaking (Fort Leavenworth, Kan.: U. S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1973), pp. 3-1 to 3-5 which is summarized in Cal W. Downs, David M. Berg, and Wil A. Linkugel, The Organizational Communicator (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 236-238.